

I INTRODUCTION

The riparian ecosystem of the Sacramento River is a unique natural resource that has great environmental, social and economic value to the people of the State of California. This Comprehensive Management Plan (this Plan) addresses a key component of that ecosystem, the Sacramento River Wildlife Area (Wildlife Area). The Wildlife Area is composed of approximately 3770 acres of important riparian habitat located along an seventy-mile reach of the Sacramento River in north central California. Figure 1 depicts the location of the Wildlife Area.

This Comprehensive Management Plan represents the commitment of the Department of Fish and Game (the Department) to manage the important resources of this Wildlife Area in accordance with the laws of the United States of America and the State of California, incorporating the best available scientific information and professional judgement. It also incorporates the commitment of the Department to coordinate and cooperate with Wildlife Area neighbors, other local interests, the Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum (SRCAF) and other conservation entities that are active along the Sacramento River. This Plan proposes practical, science-based conservation of the natural ecosystem with provision for compatible public recreation use. It is based on an Ecosystem Approach to habitat management consistent with the principles of the *Sacramento River Conservation Area Handbook (Handbook)*. It is intended to contribute to the recovery of Special Status Species and the maintenance of other native species and game species utilizing natural processes to create a sustainable system over the long term.

❖ The Mission of the Department

The Department of Fish and Game, as part of the Resources Agency of the State of California, has the following mission to guide its planning and operations:

“The Mission of the Department of Fish and Game is to manage California’s diverse fish, wildlife, and plant resources, and the habitats upon which they depend, for their ecological values and for their use and enjoyment by the public”

The Department manages fish, wildlife, plant species and natural communities for their intrinsic and ecological value and their benefits to people. This includes the goal of habitat protection and maintenance in a sufficient amount and quality to ensure the survival of all species and natural communities. The Department is also responsible for the diversified use of fish and wildlife including recreational, commercial, scientific and educational uses.

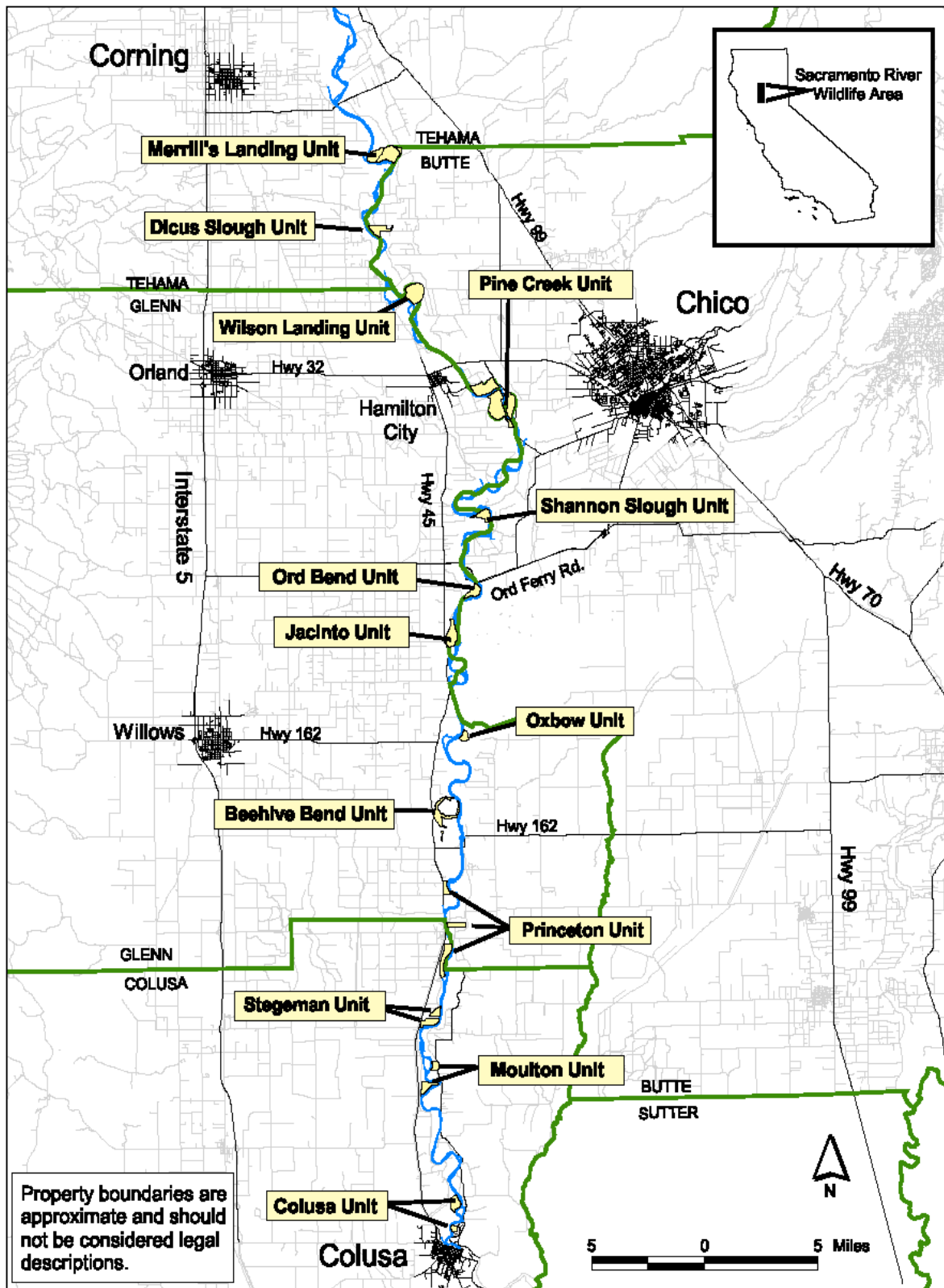


Figure 1. Location of the Sacramento River Wildlife Area

❖ The Purpose of Wildlife Areas

California is renowned as a land of magnificent natural scenery and a wealth of wildlife. Some of the state's most important sites for wildlife and coincidentally, some of its most scenic, are designated wildlife areas. These lands provide habitat for a wide array of plant and animal species, including many listed as Special Status Species. Included within this system is the Sacramento River Wildlife Area.

Consistent with its Mission, the Department of Fish and Game administers 108 state wildlife areas composed of about 650,000 acres of wildlife habitat. These areas are scattered throughout the state, with most located in central and northern California. The state owns about two-thirds of this acreage while the remainder is managed under agreements with other public agencies. The Department of Fish and Game manages these Wildlife Areas for the following purpose:

“To protect and enhance habitat for wildlife species, and to provide the public with compatible, wildlife-related recreational uses.”

The protection and enhancement of habitat for wildlife is the principal consideration in the management of this Wildlife Area. Because the Department is also committed to the provision of compatible recreation use within the Wildlife Area, this Plan also focuses on the management of wildlife-related recreation activities that coexist within the riparian ecosystem.

❖ The Comprehensive Management Plan

The existing Sacramento River Wildlife Area is located within Colusa, Glenn, and Butte Counties. It is part of the Department's Sacramento Valley - Central Sierra Region (SVCSR). The Sacramento River Wildlife Area is composed of thirteen physically separate Units that extend from River Mile 145 (RM 145) just north of the City of Colusa, upstream to RM 215 which is three miles south of Woodson Bridge. Four of the Units are further divided into physically separated Subunits for description and inventory purposes in this Plan.

The existing Merrill's Landing Wildlife Area lies just across the county boundary from the Merrill's Landing Unit of the Sacramento River Wildlife Area. It is in Tehama County and it is within the Department's Northern California - North Coast Region (NCNCR). Originally the two Merrill's Landing properties were located across the river channel from each other, but a channel movement and subsequent sedimentation have since connected the two properties.

This Comprehensive Management Plan addresses the property that is currently included in the Sacramento River Wildlife Area and the Merrill's Landing Wildlife Area as a single management element. This Plan proposes that the two Wildlife Areas be merged because of their physical proximity and because both Areas contain the same type of important riparian habitat. Table 1 depicts the Units and Subunits of the Wildlife Area. The land area is expressed in terms of the "Record Area" and the "Current Area". The difference between the two reflects the increases and decreases in area that have resulted from the meandering of the river since the Department acquired the property.

Table 1. Sacramento River Wildlife Area Units

Unit	Subunit	Record Area (ac.) ¹	Current Area (ac.) ²	River Mile	County
Merrill's Landing	-	468.8	473	213 - 215.5 L	Butte / Tehama
Dicus Slough	-	143.8	155	209 L	Butte
Wilson Landing	-	285.5	338	203 - 205 L	Glenn
Pine Creek	North	371.7	331	196 - 198 L	Glenn
	West	471.1	463	194 - 197 R	Butte / Glenn
	East	218.6	197	194.5 - 195.5 L	Glenn
Shannon Slough	-	150	144	187 R	Glenn
Ord Bend	-	112.2	136	183 R	Glenn
Jacinto	-	283	242	180 - 181 R	Glenn
Oxbow	-	94.1	76	175 L	Glenn
Beehive Bend	-	197.9	269	170 - 171 R	Glenn
Princeton	North	120.1	86	166 R	Glenn
	East	102.3	95	164 L	Glenn
	South	227.8	194	161.5 - 163 R	Colusa
Stegeman	-	154.5	194	159 - 160 R	Colusa
Moulton	North	106	74	157L	Colusa
	South	131.2	125	155 – 156 R	Colusa
Colusa	North	118	136	146 – 147 R	Colusa
	South	44.5	42	145 L	Colusa
Totals		3801.1	3770		

Notes: ¹ Record Area reflects the Department property inventory and County Assessor's Office records.

² Current Area is calculated from the updated property boundaries in the SRGIS, which reflect land area per 5/24/99 aerial photography.

This Comprehensive Management Plan was prepared with the benefit of a significant public input program and substantial coordination with other public and private entities that operate along the Sacramento River. The expressed purposes of this Plan are as follows:

- ♦ ***To guide the management of habitats, species, appropriate public use and programs to achieve the Department's mission: "To manage California's diverse fish, wildlife, and plant resources, and the habitats upon which they depend, for their ecological values and for their use and enjoyment by the public."***
- ♦ ***To direct an Ecosystem Approach to the management of the Wildlife Area in coordination with the principles of the Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum and the objectives of the California Bay- Delta Program.***
- ♦ ***To identify appropriate public use opportunities within the Wildlife Area.***
- ♦ ***To direct the coordination of efforts and resources with the managers of other public and private conservation lands adjacent to the Wildlife Area in order to maximize the benefits of the ecosystem for fish, wildlife and native plants and to facilitate public education and interaction with the natural environment.***

- ◆ ***To direct the management of the Wildlife Area in a manner that promotes cooperative relationships with adjoining private property owners.***
- ◆ ***To establish a descriptive inventory of the sites and the wildlife and plant resources that occur in the Wildlife Area.***
- ◆ ***To provide an overview of the Wildlife Area's operation, maintenance and personnel requirements to implement management goals. It serves as a budget planning aid for annual regional budget preparation.***
- ◆ ***To provide an overview of the potential and actual environmental impacts and subsequent mitigations that may occur during management, and environmental documentation to comply with State and federal statutes and regulations.***

❖ **The Planning Process**

This Comprehensive Management Plan was developed through a partnership between the Department of Fish and Game and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). Both parties contributed resources to the project and specific roles and responsibilities were established. The Department provided overall guidance to the Planning Process and was responsible for all decisions as to the content of the Plan. The Nature Conservancy was responsible for administrative support for the project planner and for the provision of scientific input and expertise through its Sacramento River Project office located in Chico, California. The Planning Process was also coordinated with other agencies and stakeholders along the river corridor.

Management Structure - A unique management structure was developed to guide the Planning Process. A Core Work Group was established as the basic working unit for development of this Plan. It consisted of the project planner, two Wildlife Biologists and one Fisheries Biologist representing the SVCSR and the Lands and Facilities Branch of the Department of Fish and Game. A Wildlife Biologist from the CNCNR provided additional input to the Group.

The Core Work Group reported to a Steering Committee that included the Deputy Director-Science Advisor, the Chief of the Lands and Facilities Branch and the Supervising Biologist from the SVCSR. The Committee also included the Project Director and Agency and Community Relations Manager from The Nature Conservancy's Northern Central Valley Office and the manager of the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge. The Committee gave direction as to the scope and composition of this Plan.

Policy Direction - The Planning Process was guided by the general policy parameters that direct the Department of Fish and Game. These include compliance with all State and federal laws. The Department Mission, the Purpose of the Wildlife Areas and the Purposes of the Comprehensive Management Plan, as stated in this Chapter, provided broad direction for the development of this Plan. Finally, the principles established for the SRCAF and the objectives established through the California Bay Delta Program (CALFED) were considered as guidelines for this Plan. The SRCAF and the CALFED are both important partnerships to which the Department is committed.

Information Basis - The Planning Process focused on the development of three major forms of new information that all contributed to the draft Plan. These were Public Input, Science and Analysis and Agency Coordination. Public Input was obtained through an extensive Public Outreach Program as described below. Science and Analysis was established through the development of a detailed property inventory for all of the Units and Subunits within the Wildlife Area. Information was obtained through a literature search, meetings with knowledgeable individuals, onsite field analysis and review of various technical studies. Agency coordination was a product of the Integrated Planning Program that included numerous meetings with state and federal agencies that manage and regulate other public properties along the Sacramento River. Figure 3 illustrates the key information inputs to the Planning Process.

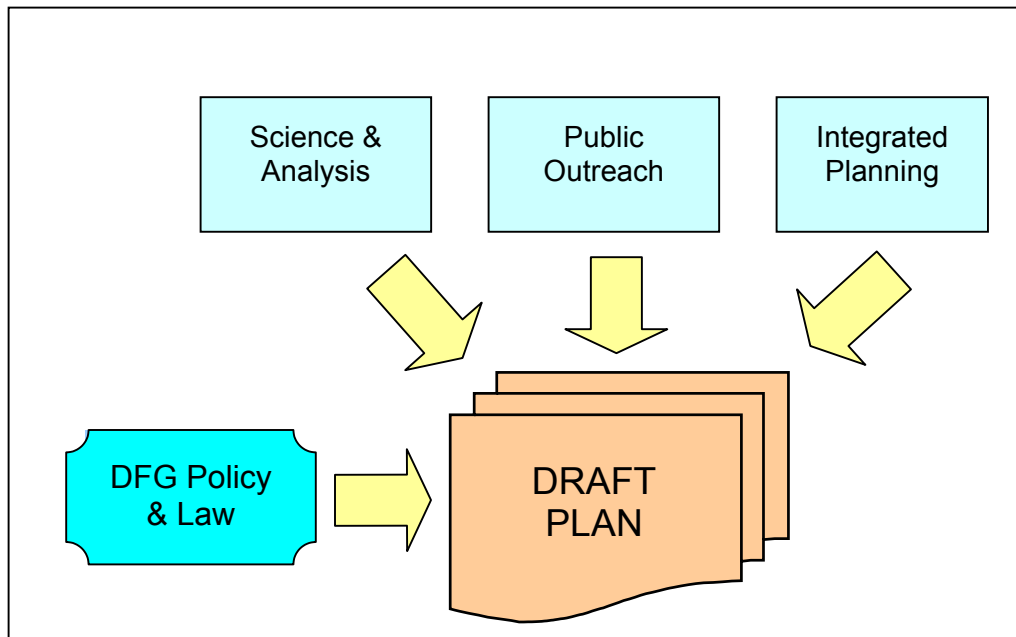


Figure 2. Information Input to the Planning Process

Public Outreach Program – A Public Outreach Program was designed as a key element of the Planning Process to ensure there were ample opportunities for local interests and the general public to be a part of the development of this Plan. It was recognized that a wide range of people considered themselves stakeholders in the Planning Process. Substantial efforts were made to identify stakeholders, contact them and solicit their ideas regarding the future of the Wildlife Area. Close coordination with the Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum was also a major part of this outreach effort. The Public Outreach Program featured the following components:

- ◆ A series of twenty-seven, detailed interviews with representatives of local government, property ownership, recreation and conservation interests.
- ◆ Two advertised public meetings for initial input.
 - April 1, 2003 in Chico, attended by 30 persons
 - April 3, 2003 in Colusa, attended by 19 persons

- ◆ Two detailed presentations and regular updates to both the Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum and the Forum's Technical Advisory Committee.
- ◆ Presentations to the Boards of Supervisors and Fish and Game Commissions of the counties in the project area.
- ◆ Review of the public input received for other recent planning projects along the river (the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Sacramento River National Wildlife Area and the Sacramento River Public Recreation Access Study)
- ◆ Two advertised public meetings for input on the draft Plan.
 - December 1, 2003 in Chico, attended by 23 persons.
 - December 4, 2003 in Chico, attended by 14 persons.
- ◆ Presentation of the draft Plan to the Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum.

Appendix A provides a summary of the comments received at the initial public meetings, a summary of interview comments and examples of the various communication devices that were utilized to publicize the Planning Process.

Integrated Planning Program – An Integrated Planning Program was prepared to ensure that planning for the Wildlife Area was coordinated with plans for other habitat conservation lands along the Sacramento River. The Wildlife Area is part of a mosaic of public and private habitat properties along the river corridor. Other substantial habitat conservation ownerships include those of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the State Department of Parks and Recreation, the State Department of Water Resources and the State Lands Commission. Direct coordination with these agencies was deemed essential in order to maximize the benefit of the riparian ecosystem for fish, wildlife and plant species and to support cost effective management of the area. Coordination with other agencies was vital during the preparation of this Plan and it will remain important in the ongoing management of the Wildlife Area. Key provisions of the Integrated Planning Program included:

- ◆ The Core Work Group serving as part of the Expanded Team for the preparation of the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge.
- ◆ Initial meetings with appropriate staff of DPR, DWR and CALFED to identify specific opportunities for coordinated planning and management.
- ◆ The Steering Committee reviewing the management coordination findings of the Sacramento River Public Recreation Access Study.
- ◆ Utilizing the Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum to help disseminate information regarding this Plan to address public and private interests.

Environmental Analysis - An environmental analysis pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act was prepared in conjunction with the Draft Plan. This analysis evaluated the potential environmental impacts of the continued operation of the Wildlife Area under the provisions of this Plan. This assessment concluded that a Negative Declaration should be approved for the project; a finding that the project would not have a significant impact on the environment. The Negative Declaration, which is contained in Appendix K, was approved by the Director of the Department of Fish and Game in conjunction with the approval of this Plan.